

# MadFolk News

## Bridging divides with Crys Matthews

By Darlene Buhler

I saw Crys Matthews live for the first time one year ago, I was attending the International Folk Music Alliance conference in New Orleans. Some nights go long, until 2:00 in the morning, and you can find yourself music weary, it was one of those nights, and then Crys took the stage and I sat up straight with a smile on my face and thought I think she would be great for the Willy Street Fair, and I immediately started talking to her agent. Well we all know how 2020 went down. But until we can make live music happen on a MadFolk stage, take a listen to her and what follows is a



little more about Crys.

Ask about the new generation of social justice music-makers and Crys Matthews will be mentioned. A prolific lyricist, Matthews blends Americana, folk, jazz, blues, bluegrass and funk into a bold, complex performance steeped in traditional melodies punctuated by honest, original lyrics. "While each and every day, on each and every media platform, we're reminded of the division, alienation, marginalization, and divisiveness rampant in our country (and our world), we're not often enough met with people like Matthews," said Justin Hiltner of Bluegrass Situation, "who exist as reminders of what beauty can occur when we bridge those divides." Her two 2017 releases, a full-length album called 'The Imagineers', a selection of thoughtful songs about love and life, and an EP called 'Battle Hymn for an Army of Lovers', which tackles social justice themes, helped earn Matthews high praise like that from Hiltner as well as the title of 2017 NewSong Music and Performance Competition grand prize winner. Matthews also won the People's Music Network's Social Justice Songs contest at the 2017 Northeast Regional Folk Alliance.

On the title track of her newest EP, Matthews says, "Must be 10,000 miles between here and forgiveness." 'These Old Hands' is about that journey. Her eighth studio release social justice songs. "It is the most vulnerable I've ever been in my music," Matthews says. From the title track, written about picking up where a love leaves off, to the final track, written

about familial complexities, Matthews is letting her listeners see behind what she calls her "titanium wall." 'These Old Hands' is already garnering acclaim from Folk DJs and finished out 2019 in Folk Alley's Top Ten of 2019. Matthews already has her sights on a pre-election release of a full-length social-justice album called Changemakers.

A southeastern North Carolina native who now calls Washington, DC home, Matthews has been compared to everyone from Toshi Reagon to Tracy Chapman to Ruthie Foster. Equally at home in an acoustic listening room as she is on stage at large music festivals, Matthews has quickly gathered a loyal following on the east coast playing such prestigious venues as the Sundance Film Festival, The Birchmere, The Hamilton, and Jammin'. Thoughtful, realistic and emotional, Matthews' songs speak to the voice of our generation and remind us why music indeed soothes the soul.

*"I think a lot of the time protest music comes from a place of anger and fear, which can be wearing. But Matthews' work—I highly encourage you to listen to her other recent release, The Imagineers—is imbued with love. Not squishy romantic love, but love in the radical sense: a deep belief in human goodness and a worldview that seeks to bring that goodness out of people. It's this love that elevates these songs that would, in lesser hands, sound cliché or insipid. **Battle Hymn For An Army Of Lovers** is required listening for all of us."*

- Adobe and Teardrops

## MadFolk's Next Concert????

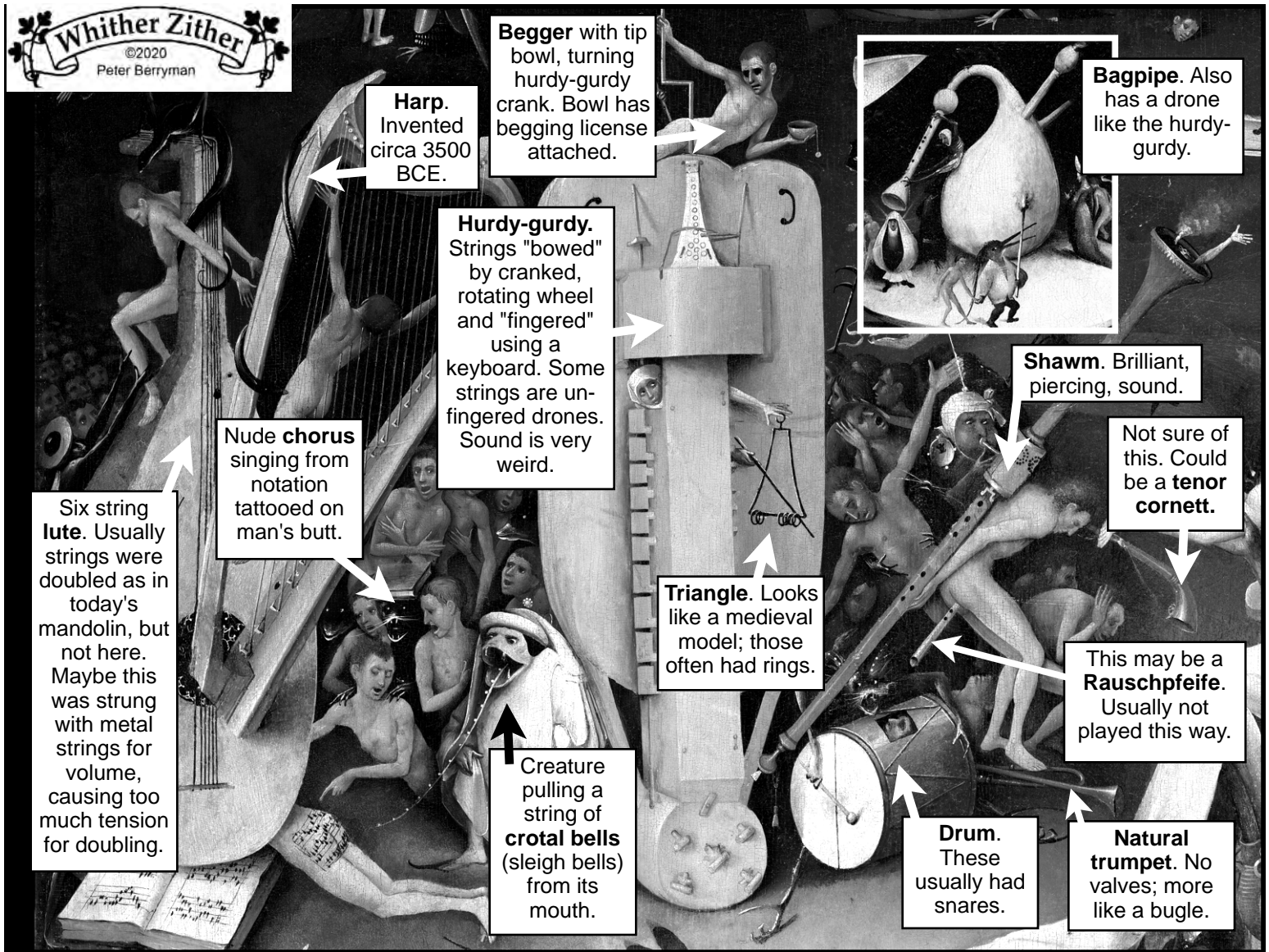
Like you, we are dreaming of when we can gather for some live music, when that happens, I am guessing I will be out every night taking in whatever the community of music gives me!

For Madfolk hosting of a show, we are currently working with Wild Hog in the Woods to do a virtual concert to help benefit the Wil-Mar Center. Cur-

rently home to Wild Hog in the Woods and many of MadFolk concerts have been on that stage! And of course their sponsorship of the MadFolk stage at Willy Street Fair.... So that is in the works for February or March... we will keep you posted.

As far as an actual live show, I am going to start looking to October for

our first show of 2021. We still don't know what festival season will be like, but perhaps by September we will have Covid immunizations done and at least have the season ending festival. Like you, we are all waiting until it is safe. We look forward to seeing you in the New Year!



## HIERONYMUS BOSCH JUG BAND

I've hinted previously that I'm a big fan of Surrealism, and Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516) is one of my favorite Surrealists, even though he was born 474 years before Andre Breton wrote the first Surrealist Manifesto in 1924 (and let's not even mention the surrealist art of ancient cultures thousands of years before Bosch).

Breton didn't mention Bosch, but eventually 20th century Surrealists like Joan Miro, Salvador Dali, Rene Magritte, and Max Ernst became diehard fans of Hieronymus. Dissolving once more into the intricacies of the **Garden of Earthly Delights**, probably Bosch's most famous work, I'm naturally drawn to the third panel of the triptych, which contains all the musical instruments. This is the Hell panel, of course.

Shown is a detail of this panel, and my guess is the instruments pictured are for the most part of the type played by street musicians of the Renaissance, with more demure instruments like the harpsichord, clavichord, and viola de gamba, left out of the picture. They're for grownups, indoors, at church.

Wikipedia says the common thought is that lust is symbolized by the huge instruments, and that "There has also been the view that Bosch's use of music here might be a rebuke against traveling minstrels, often thought of as purveyors of bawdy song and verse." Some things never change.

But in my opinion it's also likely that he was playing the part of the "untrustworthy narrator" and was expressing the feelings of a repressive

society, not his own feelings. Hard to believe he could so lovingly paint the details of the gorgeous hurdy-gurdy if he hated the sound of the thing.

In any event, he does show a few poor tortured souls holding their hands over their ears in agony, signifying the universal reactive motto to new and dissonant genres of music, "That's not music, that's noise." Anyway, I like to think of this section of the painting as the Hieronymus Bosch Jug Band, even if there was no jug.

WZ JAN. 2021

High resolution copy of the painting:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_Garden\\_of\\_Earthly\\_Delights\\_by\\_Bosch\\_High\\_Resolution.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Garden_of_Earthly_Delights_by_Bosch_High_Resolution.jpg)



Review by Kiki Schueler

It should come as no surprise that Brennen Leigh's gorgeous Prairie Love Letter was produced by Robbie Fulks. With her pristine vocals, bluegrass sensibilities, instrumental prowess, and knack for writing instantly memorable songs, she is essentially his musical girl twin. Having Fulks on board ensured these odes to the land of her youth were rendered true to their source material. It also allowed her into his musical circle of friends. Half the songs here were recorded by Chicago's Steve Albini at his Electrical Audio Studio. Best known as a punk rocker and producer of Nirvana's Nevermind, Albini is a frequent Fulks collaborator. Other known associates include astonishing fiddler Shad Cobb, and bassist Todd Phillips, a founding member of the Dave Grisman Quartet and member of Joan Baez's band. Leigh's musical partner Noel McKay also contributes guitar, harmony vocals, and songwriting co-writes. Fulks leaves the producer's seat to play guitar and banjo, and deliver some distinctive backing vocals. In addition, bluegrass mainstay Tim O'Brien drops by with his fiddle and mandolin for a pair of tunes.

Leigh says of her hometown on the Minnesota/North Dakota border, "I've lived away for eighteen years and been homesick every one of them," which is why Love Letter is such a winningly convincing concept record. Opening track "Don't You Know I'm from Here" proves you can go home again, even if home might take some convincing. "Don't you know I'm from

here, they didn't even crack a smile. Don't you know I'm from here, though I've been gone for a while," she sings before conceding, "Maybe this little town looked better in my rearview mirror." Still, there is comfort to be had here, in the "rows and rows of corn" and "this dirt under my feet." The front half of the record, or side one if you will, bursts with brilliantly recalled memories. "The John Deere H" proves a tractor is worthy of an ode. The lyrics put you in the seat next to the narrator as he dreams of when he would be old enough, "It would be like heaven to start her up and till that stubborn ground. I'd climb up on that metal seat and make up my own tractor sounds." Listen for those Fulks' vocals and banjo. The heart-tugging "Billy & Beau" reads like Brokeback Mountain Junior, its childhood innocence unquestioning. "The heart wants to go where the heart wants to go and you can't undo it." Meanwhile, "The North Dakota Cowboy" remembers her own young love, never forgotten, "I still look for him in Fargo every time I'm back in town." Leigh's grandma in her wisdom uses a Cedar Waxwing as a symbol of God's love in "There's a Yellow Cedar Waxwing on the Juneberry Bush."

"Little Blue Eyed Dog" at the end of side-one marks the transition to the present. The true story may be as sappy as a Hallmark movie, but you couldn't ask for a happier ending. A pair of side two songs make life on the prairie today sound very appealing. "Elizabeth, Minnesota" finds a human version of the fairytale country mouse unable to imagine living anywhere else. And from the description, who would want to? From "I love the turning of the seasons and the smiles of old Norwegians," to "The Northern lights I'd rather see 'em, than some picture in a museum," she makes a convincing case. Pete Finney's pedal steel seals the deal. "You've Never Been to North Dakota" refutes every unfair stereotype inflicted on the state by the movie Fargo. It's pine trees and clover,

magpies and eagles, and rhyming coyote with Dakota. If it wasn't a song about the infringement of oil companies, it would be perfect for the state's tourism board. Its companion piece follows in "You Ain't Laying No Pipeline," which gives voice to the 2016 Dakota Access Pipeline protests. Her depiction of the mistreatment of the protestors decrying the destruction of sacred land, not to mention the song's singalong quality, would make Woody Guthrie proud. Leigh should be proud too; Prairie Love Letter could not have succeeded any more brilliantly.

Mad Folk News is published monthly by the Madison Folk Music Society, a non-profit, volunteer-led society dedicated to fostering folk music in the Madison area.

Contact us at madfolk@charter.net. Learn about concerts, membership, scholarships, and volunteer opportunities at www.madfolk.org.

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